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8 Panthers on Coast Acquitted Of Plotting Murder and Assault

LOS ANGELES, Dec. 23 (UPI)—A jury acquitted Elmer Pratt, Southern California leader of the Black Panther party, and seven other defendants today of conspiracy to commit murder.

The jury did find Pratt and eight others guilty of conspiracy to possess illegal weapons, including a machine gun and fire bombs in a case stemming from a gun battle with the police in 1969.

Convicted, in addition to Pratt, were Robert Bryan, Wayne Pharr, Willie Stafford, Tommie Williams, Renee Moore, Paul Redd, Albert Armour, and Craig Williams.

The panel returned 63 separate verdicts against a total of 12 Panthers, but deadlocked on the remaining nine counts against eight of the defendants. A mistrial was declared on those charges—mostly assault with a deadly weapon a policeman—and the state did not indicate if it planned to seek a new trial.

Two of the defendants were acquitted of all charges.

The seven-month trial grew out of the four-hour gun battle between Panthers and the police at the party headquarters in Los Angeles on Dec. 8, 1969, in which three policemen and six Panthers were wounded.

The defense had argued that the gun battle was a result of

provocation by policemen when they tried to enter the building, occupied by the Panthers, before dawn and then opened a massive barrage when shots were fired from inside.

Pratt, 26 years old, who was Deputy Defense Minister of the Panthers, is a follower of the Eldridge Cleaver faction of the party. His wife, Sandra, 23, who was also a defendant, was found murdered in early November.

A riot erupted in the courtroom three days after Mrs. Pratt's body was found in a gutter, with Pratt and his closest followers swinging and kicking at other defendants considered to be supporters of Huey P. Newton, leader of another Panther faction.

Pratt and five other men have been held without bail on charges of conspiracy to murder policemen, but now that they have been found guilty of the far lesser charge it was expected that their attorneys would shortly move for their release on bond.

Superior Court Judge George M. Dell set Jan. 13 for a hearing on the bail matter and other motions.

There were eight men and four women on the jury. Five were Negroes.

DO NOT FORGET THE NEEDIEST!